

**Testimony of Manne Lasiloo, Co-President National UNITY Council
Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Hearing on Tribal Youth Initiatives
May 26, 1999**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee on Indian Affairs. My name is Manne Lasiloo and I currently serve as Co-President of the United National Indian Youth (UNITY) council, based in Oklahoma City, OK. In addition, by way of background I am 19 years old and a student majoring in Political Science at Mesa Community College, AZ. I am an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community of Sacaton, Arizona. My maternal grandfather is the late Coyd H. Thomas of Komatke, AZ, who was a World War II veteran and a Sergeant of the Bushmaster Division. My paternal grandparents are Amacita Lasiloo and the late Marcus Lasiloo (A Korean War Veteran) of the Zuni Pueblo, NM. My mother is Jeri A. Thomas and my father is Greg M. Lasiloo.

I want to thank the Committee for conducting this hearing and I am honored to have the opportunity to represent UNITY and the Akimel O'odham Pee-Posh Youth Council of the Gila River Indian Community. I believe this hearing is very timely because in many ways our young people in this country are in a crisis. For Indian young people, in many instances, the circumstances are much worse and the challenges far greater. Although many of you know the abysmal health and social statistics that exist in many of our communities, this morning I would like to share with you some of the positive things that are happening in our communities.

As the Co-President of the national UNITY council and a past President of the Akimel O'odham Pee-Posh Youth Council I have had the privilege of being a part of great change. Beginning with my involvement in my own community and now at the national level through UNITY there has been significant growth in the number of programs and partnerships that have been built. It is from this perspective that I would like to present my testimony.

Personal History:

As I was preparing my testimony for this hearing, I was thinking about all of the programs that I have been involved with over the past few years, and all the events and conferences where I have learned many things. However, it struck me that what has been most important is not "What" has been accomplished, but rather "Why" I became involved in my community with my peers and now with UNITY?

When I was younger many of the things I did were not productive. Sports in the lives of youth can only last so long before they need guidance other than sports. I played sports for most of my school years. However, if it were not for the guidance of the Youth Council I would not be before you today. During my early high school years I was doing things such as throwing rocks at semi-trailer trucks, searching for my identity, and wasting my potential. Most of these activities were mischievous, but at that age I knew no better. I didn't care much about what went on in the outside world because the outside world did not include "us" in its plans. Many of the things that

were essential to our survival in the “outside world” were not provided. Everywhere I looked in the community any social ill you could imagine were prevalent in our lives. This was due to lack of available enrichment activities. All of the people I hung out with were the people I grew up with. All of us had the potential to be what we wanted, but we needed something more.

As the years past, I grew tired of searching for a sense of belonging or identity. I am sure that many of you, at one point, also searched for a sense of identity and belonging. I believe it is a universal truth that all youth search for. It is a sense of belonging. More importantly, I grew tired of watching my people slowly become victims of circumstance. At 14 I lost a close friend to gang violence. He was beaten to death by a group of local gang members. Mr. Chairman, this is where I came to a crossroads in my life and the point where I got involved with the Youth Council.

Akimel O'odham Pee-Posh Youth Council:

Not only did the youth council provide me with my first job; it also was instrumental in bringing the first Boys and Girls Club to a reservation in Arizona. Ironically, one of the themes of the club was “to provide a sense of belonging.” As a result, I embraced this sense of belonging and became an active member. To my amazement, within my first year as a member I was selected as the first “Youth of the Year” of the Gila River Boys and Girls Club.

Since then, I have been privileged to work with people in my community who have shared a common vision of how young people like myself can be involved. As a result, the activities and programs of the Youth Council have become a model for many programs through UNITY.

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In February of 1996, the Youth Council established the Marion B. Miles Youth Scholarship to provide supplemental financial assistance to Gila River youth whose financial capabilities would not allow them to continue their goals. Marion Miles had realized that a major obstacle in achieving progress was a need for financial support to provide youth an opportunity to succeed in education. To continue Marion Mile’s dream, the Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council pledged to honor her by establishing a Youth Scholarship in her name.

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In June 1996, the Youth Council was selected as the site of one of the top minority youth development programs in the nation by the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. The Youth Council agreed to participate in the 1996 research project “Leadership Development Programs for Minority Youth: Understanding What Works.” With the support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research provided the Youth Council with a grant.

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In June 1996, the Youth Council, started one of the first Boys and Girls Club in their community. The first club opened on the West Side of our community. The Youth Council was concerned about the future of the very youngest members of our community and, as a result, we applied for a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance. For these efforts we were

awarded a grant to start a club, which seeks to motivate youth to continue in school and gain a sense of achievement, as well as reduce delinquency in the community.

- In November 1996, the Youth Council coordinated its 2nd Gila River Kids Voting program. This mock voting program allows kids to be involved in the election process from a very early age. For example, Gila River youth cast ballots for the Presidential candidates as well as the Tribal ballot for their Tribal Governor, Lt. Governor, Chief Judge, Associate Judges and 17 propositions on issues they believed to be important to the future of the Gila River Indian Community. Because of this kind of commitment approximately 1000 students across the community were involved in the 1996 program.

- In July 1997, the Youth Council was instrumental in establishing the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) Youth Commission during the 1997 Mid-Year Conference in Juneau, Alaska. The Youth Commission has grown into a major element at the NCAI sessions. It is composed of young Indian people interested in politics, tribal governance, and Native American issues, generally, that impact Indian Youth. The Youth Commission is modeled after NCAI, with committee and sub-committee meetings; resolution writing, lobbying, mentoring programs, and talking circles.

- In November 1997, at the national NCAI meeting in Santa Fe, NM, the Youth Council had the opportunity to share its goals with the national Close-Up Foundation. Recognizing the need to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to become involved citizens and leaders, the Youth Council believed a partnership could be created. As a result, in February 1998, the Youth Council was awarded a local program grant for years 1998 and 1999.

With the support of Close-Up the Gila River Indian Community is the second tribal nation to develop a program that seeks to provide Native Americans a better understanding and appreciation of their dual-citizenship, both as citizens of the United States and their Tribal Nation.

- In October 1998, The National Congress of American Indian (NCAI) Youth Commission convened at the NCAI 55th Annual Session in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and had the opportunity to meet with different tribal leaders throughout the convention. Two representatives were chosen to serve on the Youth Commission. Darren Pedro, President of the Youth Council was selected as one of the representatives and Victoria Quintero, Vice President of the Youth Council was selected as an alternate to this Youth Commission.

- In December 1998, the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council sponsored the first Gila River Youth Health Forum in conjunction with the Gila River Indian Community Turning Point Partnership. The forum was designed to involve youth in voicing their ideas on what public health

should be in their community. As a result, youth were able to brainstorm with local community partners together to begin to transform and strengthen health care within the community.

- In April 1999, the Youth Council sponsored the first Gila River Indian Community Retreat. The goal was to provide youth with the skills and resources needed to assume leadership roles in their respective communities and among their peers. The retreat consisted of speakers and seminars on key issues facing the youth today. The event focused on four areas: Strategic Planning, Youth Leadership, Wellness and Culture. The retreat was funded by a grant from the Gila River Indian Community Tobacco Tax and Health Care Fund.

- In May 1999, the Youth Council sponsored the 2nd Gila River Close-Up Program. During this intense 3-day program, students learned the political system through a “hands on” approach and were exposed to personal development, self-esteem building and leadership education in a non-classroom environment. This educational experience will empower students to take a more active and assertive role in their community, family, and personal lives.

- Importantly, the Youth Council partners with many organizations and institutions to develop programs to promote education, personal development, citizenship and leadership. Some of these organizations include: National Indian Education Association, National Congress of American Indians Youth Commission, National UNITY Network, National UNITY Council, National Organizations for Youth Safety, National Youth Network, National Crime Prevention Council, Close Up Foundation, Arizona State Juvenile Justice Commission, Kids Voting Arizona, Maricopa County Association of Governments Youth Policy Advisory Committee, Boys and Girls Clubs of the East Valley, Boys and Girls Clubs - Gila River, Gila River Indian Community Gang Task Force, Gila River Indian Community Turning Point Partnership.

- As Indian tribes share a unique relationship with the federal government the Youth Council has also partnered with several federal agencies. These include, but hopefully are not limited to: the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Indian Health Service.

It is these kinds of opportunities and learning experiences that the Youth Council provides for our young people. As our community grows so will our youth program. For me, I am honored to have been a part of many of these programs and most recently I was humbled to be appointed by Arizona Governor, Jane Hull, to serve on Arizona’s Juvenile Justice Commission.

Mr. Chairman, the work of the Youth Council continues to foster community awareness and community involvement while also developing greater partnerships with our neighboring communities, and state and federal agencies. For all the youth that have been involved with the

Youth Council, including myself, we have shared in many accomplishments that have brought great personal satisfaction.

UNITY:

As the Co-President of the UNITY council, elected by my peers last July, I would say that many of the programs that I have been involved with in my community could not have been successful without the support and guidance from UNITY. Conversely, UNITY also serves as a national support group for the activities of Indian youth councils across the country. In many cases, UNITY will utilize successful tribal youth programs as models for other communities. It is the purpose of UNITY to serve as a national network to promote personal development, citizenship, and leadership. Not only does UNITY provide guidance and direction for youth programs; it also serves as a catalyst for building partnerships with organizations and governmental agencies to further the goal of Indian youth leadership.

The resources UNITY provides are important, because they have been working with Native American youth for more than two decades. Their expertise in developing programs, networking Indian youth councils and developing partnerships with large national organizations provides a direction that many Indian youth groups need.

For example, the work of UNITY is recognized in the following ways:

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The UNITY network currently consists of over 178 youth councils in 34 states and over 300 individual memberships.

- UNITY sponsors an annual UNITY Conference, one of the largest gatherings of Native American youth in the country.
- UNITY affiliated youth councils are making positive differences in their communities. Programs such as after-school tutoring, cleaning houses of elders, removing graffiti in their communities, cleaning tribal cemeteries and burial grounds are just a few examples of the positive activities of UNITY.

While there are several initiatives that UNITY is currently developing, I would like to speak about two new programs that I believe have great promise:

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Tribal Government Initiative - "Engaging Youth in Tribal Government": The purpose of this program is to develop a national awareness campaign to reach a broad range of Indian young people through the creation of a youth for tribal government program. It is our goal to establish a minimum of 85 programs in UNITY affiliated youth councils and schools.

To date, we have received funding from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) to coordinate a two-year project which will initially have 5-participating tribes. This sites will be established on the following reservations: Sault St. Marie tribe, the Ho Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, Fort Belknap Indian Community in Montana, Salt River Indian Community and Gila River Indian Community in Arizona.

The project will commence at the upcoming national UNITY conference in Denver, CO on June 25, 1999. At this time I would like to extend an invitation to each Committee member to attend this conference. It is anticipated that the opening session of the conference will be devoted to establishing goals and objectives of the program. In general, the primary goal is for youth to gain an understanding and appreciation for tribal government and to become informed, contributing members of their respective tribes, villages, and communities.

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National Fitness Initiative - "Celebrate Fitness"

UNITY is committed to launching a national fitness campaign for American Indians and Alaska Natives where the youth councils will serve as a catalyst for implementing this program. "Celebrate Fitness" will promote physical activity, sound nutrition, and healthy lifestyles. To date, both the National Congress of American Indians and the National Indian Education Association have adopted resolutions supporting our initiative. We hope to involve all 178 youth councils in 34 states that are affiliated with UNITY to promote and adopt fitness initiatives.

Importantly many of these vital programs are created and can be sustained only with the help and assistance of other organizations. Much like the work in my community, UNITY has also established partnerships with many organizations and entities.

Some of the notable UNITY partners include:

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The National Indian Education Association

- Volunteer to End Tribal Youth Initiative
- National Organization for Youth Safety, a Partnership with the U.S. Department of Transportation
- University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
- National Crime Prevention Council
- National Mentoring Partnership Program.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I sit before you honored to tell my story of my community and that of UNITY. I sit before you with the hope that my generation and those that follow will have more opportunities to succeed. That is my vision. However, I know that this cannot occur unless we have the support of the leaders of this country.

The quote of President John F. Kennedy comes to mind when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." To me this means that Indian youth have persevered for the past 22 years through the direction of the UNITY Organization. We have done all we can for our country. We have endured a never ending list of social ills such as; Teenage Pregnancy, Diabetes, Suicide, Gang Violence, Assimilation, and Alcohol and Drug Abuse. We have endured through the blessings of UNITY, our ancestors, and the Great Spirit. Solutions through helpful programs have provided us with the means to do this. We have survived. That is what we have done for our country. Endurance could last forever, but it cannot

last without the balance and harmony that is provided by these programs. So it is, that we the Indian youth of America, now ask you the question "what can our country do for us?"

We have earned a fair response to this in honor of generations of hardship. Allow us to pose an answer to the question for you. Our country can join in on this rebirth and we would like the Committee and the Congress to consider the following recommendations:

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You have the power to appropriate money earmarked for many of these initiatives and we would like your support in ensuring that these programs succeed.

- We would ask your support in providing greater direction to the federal agencies under your jurisdiction to emphasize development of youth related programs. Further, these programs should also be coordinated across the various agencies.
- We would ask for your support and funding for the Indian Youth Initiative being developed through the Indian Health Service (IHS).
- There is a great need for financial support for national non-profit Native American Organizations. While historically, emphasis has been placed on tribal self-determination, so often non-profit organizations are overlooked. We would ask your for your support for national programs, like UNITY, which serve as a vehicle for the collection of data and information and serve as a "think tank" to develop a national framework to address issues facing Indian youth.
- Importantly, Mr. Chairman, is to recognize Indian youth when considering budget and other policy matters and to support the partnerships that ARE working. Maybe that recognition could come in the form of a Congressional resolution supporting Indian Youth initiatives and providing an emphasis to federal agencies to support youth partnerships.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I would be happy to answer and questions.